Sermon Charges - 1835 - 1840
3087

THINGS INDIFFERENT.

A SERMON

ON I CORINTHIANS X. 23.

PREACHED

AT ST. MARY'S, OXFORD,

On Sunday Evening, Feb. 8, 1835.

BY THE

REV. GEORGE MOBERLY, M.A.

TUTOR OF BALLIOL COLLEGE.

OXFORD:

J. H. PARKER;

J. G. AND F. RIVINGTON, LONDON.

1835.

3057

BAXTER, PRINTER, OXFORD.

3087

ADVERTISEMENT.

THIS Sermon is printed for the same reason for which it was preached—in the hope of ministering to Christian edification. The Author wishes, however, to observe, that (with the exception of the very conclusion) it was composed before he was aware that there were any local circumstances to which it might seem to be directly intended to refer. Since those circumstances have come to his knowledge, he feels that they form an additional reason why he should endeavour to press truths and precepts so important upon the consciences of his brethren.

Balliol College, Feb. 9, 1835.

8087

1 Corinthians x. 23.

All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful, but all things edify not.

The eighth, ninth, and tenth chapters of the first Epistle to the Corinthians seem to contain a single argument. The reasoning, as is usual with St. Paul, is not consecutive, nor the connexion perfectly apparent throughout; and the division into chapters unfortunately disconnects the parts of the argument still further. But when the passage is read altogether, and interpreted with reference to the very peculiar style of the ardent Apostle, there can be little doubt that all bears upon the same point; and that the question of eating the meat offered to idols, with which the eighth chapter begins, and the tenth concludes, is the subject of all that intervenes.

The question of the lawfulness of eating the meat which had been consecrated in heathen temples was, for two reasons, a very difficult and very important one to the Corinthians. First, because in so large and luxurious a city as the capital of proconsular Achaia, there probably was little other meat to be procured than that which had been first slain in sacrifice in some of the numerous and costly temples: and, secondly, because in a place so

full of knowledge and philosophy as Corinth, practical scruples of this kind, especially when attended with consequences so inconvenient, would naturally be despised and derided by many, who, partly from real strength of thought, and partly from that most dangerous independency of mind which always accompanies weak talent, undutiful feeling, and small knowledge, would feel themselves above the weakness of entertaining any such doubts.

St. Paul meets the question directly, and settles it on broad and most intelligible principles. He begins by acknowledging, that as in itself the idol is nothing, so the meat consecrated to such an imaginary being is really not thereby rendered unlawful food for Christians. They who are free from the scruple, therefore, are so far in the right; yet let them, he adds, be cautious how they presume upon their knowledge; knowledge puffeth up, charity edifieth; if any man think he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. If any man love God, the same is known of Him.

But then, he urges, all have not this knowledge; some are still only half emancipated from idolatry, and when they eat such meat, feel that they are still acknowledging the idols whom they have renounced. In them it is sin to eat. And if any of them see thee, which hast knowledge, sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those

things which are offered unto idols, and through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish for whom Christ died? Remember, when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.

In the ninth chapter he urges this argument further by his own example. Do I myself, he says, attempt to evade these principles of exalted charity? Am not I an Apostle? if not an Apostle to others, certainly your Apostle? Do I not forego every claim to maintenance and support from you, working with my own hands in order not to be burthensome to you? On what principle do you suppose that I relinquish these and other things, which I might most unquestionably claim and enjoy? It is for two reasons. First, for charity; I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And, secondly, for my own discipline and improvement; relinquishing justifiable ease and innocent enjoyment, thus keeping under my body, and bringing it into subjection, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.

But further, he continues in the tenth chapter, this partaking of idol sacrifices is not so innocent a thing as it may seem. Consider what was the case with the Jews. They had some things which were analogous to our two characteristic rites, the Christian sacraments: for they were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and they did all

eat the same spiritual meat, and did drink the same spiritual drink: when they were discontented with this spiritual food, and lusted after the flesh-pots of Egypt; and when, instead of adhering to the invisible God, whose pillar of cloud had led them through the sea, they sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play before the golden calf in Horeb; God was displeased with them, and overthrew them with various and terrible judgments in the wilderness. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be ye most cautious, lest inadvertently ye be betrayed into idolatry. I speak as to wise men, judge ye what I say. When we Christians bless the cup, and break the bread, do we not communicate with each other in one worship? When the Jews eat of the sacrifices, do they not thereby partake of the altar,—that is, communicate with each other in one worship? What do I say then? do I say that the idol is any thing, or that which is offered to the idol is any thing? But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, *they* sacrifice to devils and not to God; and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils. Ye cannot rightly drink both the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils. Ye cannot at one moment be partakers (and therefore joint-worshippers) at the table of the Lord, and at the next at the table of devils.

True, all these things may be lawful, but they are not expedient: true, they may be lawful, but they do not edify. These are your rules and prin-

ciples of conduct. Let no man seek his own good, but every man another's. Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. Give none offence either to the Jews, or the Gentiles, or the Church of God. Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved, be ye followers of me, even as I also am a follower of Christ.

The particular circumstances under which the Apostle addressed these admirable chapters to the Corinthians have long since passed away from the Church of Christ; but the importance and value of the precept contained in them can never pass away. There still are, and ever will be while the world remains, things which are lawful, but not expedient; things which are lawful, but not to edification. In truth, of the acts which occur to every man amongst us to perform in the daily passage of his life, how few are there of which it is possible to say at once, 'It is unlawful.' How seldom, in proportion to the vast number of acts performed, does a man do any thing of which it can be pronounced at once, and without reference to any circumstances, that it is sinful. Characters are formed, dispositions perfected, the heart inveterately bent towards good or evil, and therefore towards happiness or misery, by the agency of *things indifferent*. Many a man loses hope and cause for hope by means of things lawful. The very acts which in one man are the

materials of a character of dutiful and contented self-denial and holiness, foster in his next neighbour's mind the very opposite dispositions. If it be true, that of the whole number of human acts, at least nine-tenths are neither absolutely commanded nor absolutely forbidden; it is also most true, and not enough remembered, that there is not one even of these which is devoid of real and serious influence upon the character and prospects of a man.

It is in the very nature of indifferent things that they do not admit of being treated or settled in the abstract. General rules cannot be given about them, because the good or evil of acting in them depends, by the very hypothesis, altogether upon the particular circumstances. And hence we may observe, how far more advantageous it is for us that the writings of the New Testament do not contain a systematic code of abstract precepts, but rather the practical application of principles to real cases and real characters. In this particular instance we are able to apprehend St. Paul's doctrine, and apply it to our new circumstances, far better from the settlement of the question of eating the idol offerings, than if he had laid down the most elaborate principles in a general way. And therefore, also, in deducing lessons from St. Paul's example, we may learn, that we shall be likely to do more good, in proportion as we are more definite and particular in our applications. I shall therefore not scruple to refer to minute and particular instances, in which

great mischief seems to be sometimes incurred in the treatment of *things indifferent*.

I shall not attempt to define the boundaries of what is *indifferent* in actions, nor to make distinctions, such as might easily and reasonably be made, between various kinds of indifferent actions. Suffice it to say, that when St. Paul, in emphatical language, repeats twice in the same sentence, *all things* are lawful, he assuredly means to include under that denomination far the greater part of the acts which men ordinarily perform. The things expressly forbidden are few, and comparatively rare: the things expressly commanded are also few, and easily performed. Not many men often do the one, or omit the other. It is then of the vastly numerous and various acts intermediate between these, upon the treatment of which depends almost all of human character and disposition that we speak; and perhaps the most profitable mode of speaking will be to pass at once, after a short general statement of principles, to practical applications of them.

On referring to the passage of St. Paul, in order to gather from it the general principles by which our conduct in all such cases is to be regulated, we find first, as the most comprehensive rule of all, *whether ye eat, or whether ye drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.* This rule as it embraces all others, so seems to require others to explain and unfold it: for we must needs know what means we have in our power of promoting

God's glory. *Directly* we cannot glorify God except by praise, and that is beside the present subject; and therefore the Apostle must mean us to glorify Him in some other or indirect way, as indeed he distinctly shews in this passage. But one important observation arises already from the mere statement of this rule. If we can in any manner glorify God by our mode of acting even in indifferent matters, then it is quite plain that such matters, however indifferent in themselves, cannot be indifferent to us. It cannot be indifferent to us, whether, when we have the power, we glorify God, or abstain from glorifying Him. Let us learn then from hence, that every practical decision, even in cases of the most perfect indifferency, which we cannot conscientiously refer to God's glory, is a wrong decision. If God permits us to make an offering to Him of all the small and apparently trifling acts of our life, both their smallness, and His goodness in so receiving them, are most weighty reasons why we should gratefully and anxiously dedicate them to Him.

There are two modes by which St. Paul seems to say that God may be glorified in indifferent actions. First, by performing them in a spirit of the largest *charity*. (*Do all to the glory of God, giving none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God.*) Such charity is either negative, (*giving none offence,*) or positive, (*let no man seek his own, but every man another's good.*) Such

charity again is to be exercised towards all mankind, both positively and negatively; towards the malicious and uncharitable adversary; towards those who, from ignorance or other such cause, are entirely unconnected or disjoined from us; towards the weak brother; towards our own friends and companions; negatively, for we are to give none offence, *neither to Jews, nor to Gentiles, nor to the church of God;* positively, for St. Paul, who offers himself for our example, became *to the Jews as a Jew, that he might gain the Jews; to them that were under the law, as under the law, that he might gain them that were under the law; to them that were without law, as without law, that he might gain them that were without law. To the weak, as weak, that he might gain the weak; to all men he became all things, that he might by all means save some.*

Secondly. Even in things completely indifferent when regarded in themselves, there may be many causes in ourselves which may render them very far from indifferent to our own characters. First, for *conscience.* If a man doubts of the lawfulness of an act, to him it is unlawful. St. Paul is most clear and full upon this point. (*Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.—To him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean.—He that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith; for whatsoever is not of faith, is sin.*) Secondly, for *comparison.* If a man, when two courses are

open to him, selects that one which, though indifferent in itself, gives no opportunity or less opportunity of glorifying God by good example, by self-denial or otherwise, he deliberately disregards his Lord's precept, (*Be ye perfect, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect;*) and that becomes sin in him, which in itself is innocent. Thirdly, for *self-discipline*. The mind of man is a delicate thing. Placed in the midst of circumstances wonderfully fitted for producing and strengthening dispositions, it cannot take a step, however small, with impunity. It cannot cherish a feeling, or indulge a thought; it cannot determine in a case of choice, far less act on such determination, without contracting the sphere of its future free agency; without rendering habit more inveterate, and its ultimate destination of joy or pain more certain. There is not a more deadly fallacy, nor one more commonly yielded to, than that of doing a thing in some doubtfulness of mind, because forsooth *there is no harm in it. What harm is there in this or that act?* a man confidently asks; and yet he dares not trust his own most inward conscience for an answer. And there is no more unhappy habit of mind than that in which a man takes such liberties with his conscience; in which he relaxes the stern self-government of indifferent actions; in which he compromises his own better knowledge and feeling, by consoling himself that he is within the limits of things lawful in them-

selves, and wilfully neglects to remember that he has transgressed the limits of things expedient to himself.

I will not attempt to unfold these principles in greater detail, though each one of them runs out into so many subdivisions, and suggests so many and so important practical applications, that I am loth to pass them by. Those which have been mentioned may serve as a specimen of the principles on which a man's conduct ought to be guided in indifferent matters. Let him remember, first, that every indifferent act may be, and therefore must be, done to God's glory; and this in two ways. First, by the most exact and enlarged charity towards other men; a charity exhibiting itself in watchfulness to avoid all offence, and anxiety to further the good, of the weak or the strong, the enemy or the friend. Secondly, by the most minutely careful attention to himself, to his conscience, to the comparison of what things are more expedient, to his inward discipline of disposition. He who attends to these principles completely, who watches his conduct narrowly, and who, praying to God to bless this watchfulness, beseeches Him also to give him more light to his paths whereby he may direct his steps into the way of peace, will assuredly be enabled to glorify God both in his body and his spirit, even in things indifferent, while on the earth; and in his spiritual improvement under grace, and his pardon through Christ, to glorify

God yet again in the day of visitation. I proceed rather to make applications of this summary of principles to matters of our common life, in which they appear to offer great practical utility.

One of the first instances to which we seem to need to refer our principles, is the mode of spending the Sabbath. Let me not be supposed to class the observance of the fourth Commandment under the head of things indifferent. On the contrary, I know not upon what ground men can presume to distinguish degrees of obligation in obeying God's laws, nor why this Commandment should be held less binding upon the conscience than any other of the Decalogue. But there are many things, which in themselves are perfectly innocent and indifferent, which, particularly in this place, and among the younger members of the University, are commonly done on this day, to which I would call their earnest attention, in order to examine how far St. Paul's precept would sanction or disallow them. It is difficult to speak of such things with the requisite particularity, and at the same time to preserve the tone proper to this place: but I would especially refer to three points: the frequency of entertainments; the free enjoyment of various ordinary amusements; and, as arising from these, the tone of conversation and general behaviour not perceptibly differing from that of other days. It is only necessary to indicate these things; every person who hears me is well aware to what extent

the detail might be supplied. But let us consider how such things stand with St. Paul's rule of charity. Every year brings a large number of young members to our body. Some of them from large Schools, where they are already more or less familiar with such things; but many from very different scenes; from the regular tranquillity of their homes; from familiarity with orderly habits; from the custom of much devotion, certainly much propriety of deportment, on the Sunday. Let me appeal to the conscience and the memory of every one who hears me, whether *he* was not struck—whether a person so brought up must not be somewhat shocked—at the first sight of the manner in which ordinary thoughts and occupations are indulged on the Sunday. A very few weeks make a difference in his feelings. Though they are perhaps somewhat renewed when he returns to College after the first few vacations, they soon disappear altogether; the conscience of a brother is emboldened. He does what he sees others do. Does not the sin lie heavily on those who have been parties to setting such an example? And again, besides the offence actually given, how much of valuable example and encouragement is wilfully omitted! There are few circumstances under which example is more effectual, than when a young man first passes over the line which terminates his boyhood. When he comes to this place for the first time, with much of good principle which might be

cultivated, with much of good purpose which might be encouraged, but with a strong sense of shame, and a painful fear of ridicule, how much strength and stability might be imparted to his wavering character by the sight of a strict and unexceptionable example on the part of those to whom he naturally conforms himself. The simple abstinence from entertainments on the Sunday, the mere withholding of ordinary topics in conversation, on the part of those who are older, would give the most efficacious, because the most silent, encouragement to the growth of good habit in those who are less experienced. Is it much to require of Christians—of followers of St. Paul, as he also is a follower of Christ—that they should do thus much, thus much of what is importantly beneficial to themselves, in order to confer so important a benefit upon their brethren?

And again, for themselves; do they feel, or do they remember to have felt, no scruples of conscience on these points? Do they not recollect the venturous feeling with which they *first* followed the example which was set to them? And do they not even yet acknowledge, that it is not with entire ease of conscience that they pass their Sunday amid such occupation or amusement? Do they not feel doubtful whether they are doing quite right in pursuing their common studies, or indulging in their common conversation, on this day? Let them remember, that here there is no indifferency. *He*

that doubteth is condemned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatever is not of faith is sin. A Christian has no choice in such a case. If he would avoid plain and wilful sin, he must, in perfect simplicity and good faith, attend to his conscience. Or again, does he stand clear of guilt on the ground of *comparison?* God requires our best service. If these things be indifferent, are there not others which are profitable? If these things are idle, are not idle thoughts and words to be the subject of judgment in the last day? It shews little zeal for God's service to be anxious to find the minimum of indispensable devotion. It shews a temper like that of the Church at Laodicea, neither cold nor hot.

But further, to adopt the most important argument of all, how do such things stand with the self-discipline, and education of habit, the moral exercise and improvement of mind for which we were made, and for which every thing around us is so wonderfully fitted? Alas! if there be one point in which God's wisdom and man's ignorance are more signally visible than in another, in which human blindness and presumption for ever run counter to the designs of an allwise Providence, it is in this very fitness of the world about us for moral ends, in this very adaptation of circumstances,—of laws, of temptations, of natural dispositions, of difficulties and doubts, to the one great purpose of moral culture. Every observation which we can make upon the tendency of any such cir-

cumstances as fall within our notice leads towards this great and most momentous conclusion; that God hath so made man, and so fitted him to the world in which He has placed him, and to the laws which He has given him to observe, that there is nothing so small as to be without influence upon his character and prospects. Meanwhile, man in his self-called wisdom judges some to be indifferent, some to be mistaken, some to be mischievous: as if the Almighty Creator might not be trusted with His creation; as if He that made the eye could not see, nor He that fashioned the mind conceive of things aright! No; it is in the simple, dutiful course of unpresuming obedience that we are to find our real improvement, our wisdom, and our happiness. We cannot neglect one of the simple usages of our early education, we cannot venture one step out of the line of habitual devotion, upon the ground of fancied indifferency in the act, or upon the strength of our own independency of mind, without inflicting the most serious injury on our character. Most of us were brought up in exact and scrupulous attention to the sanctity of the Sabbath. We have learnt, by early habit, to feel many things improper on this day, which perhaps have in themselves nothing which can really render them unlawful: to remark as strange to us the sound of common music, the sight of all professed amusement, or secular study. Oh! let no false conceit of wisdom, no mistaken idea of emancipating ourselves

from prejudice, ever induce us to break these sacred bonds which keep us in the path of simple duty! Within them we are safe, without them who can insure us of safety? There is no danger more boundless than that of those who set themselves to destroy as prejudices, practical principles, long obeyed, and certainly innocent. The spirit of humble watchfulness, of meek yet anxious jealousy of sin, is utterly opposed to such a bold and presumptuous temper. It feels itself unsafe in approaching the limits of what is lawful. It knows of nothing unimportant; for it knows that all things may be sanctified to its use by the Holy Spirit of God, and what is so sanctified can be unimportant no longer.

Thus is Religion brought into the midst of the actual realities of our daily life. Instead of furnishing cause for mystical and unpractical raptures, instead of confining itself to the more stated and solemn hours of public and private devotion, it enters upon the stage of ordinary life, its business and amusement. Every hour of the day furnishes innumerable opportunities of action. Things indifferent surround us at every step; every step we take is an instance of resolution and selection; every case of resolution or selection is a case of habit strengthened, of sin incurred, or goodness furthered. How watchfully then should the Christian live, how cautiously and delicately should he tread in the midst of these *indifferent things*, about

which others feel themselves so free to take their pleasure! And, above all, how zealously should he beseech the aid of God's Holy Spirit to direct his path aright! With that aid, duly asked and anxiously cherished, his course will be clear, and his success certain; without such prayer, without a humble teachable spirit to co-operate with such prayer, there can be no limits to his wandering. And let him not suppose, that because he begins with things indifferent, he is in no danger of passing on to tamper with things vital. No man plunges into the extremest sins at once. By degrees consciences become emboldened, good habits are laid aside, presumption is encouraged, the sternness of self-discipline relaxed, the moral mind enfeebled; things indifferent pass with slight gradations into things unlawful, and things unlawful are soon done by him who has not trained his mind by the right conduct of things indifferent.

I have attempted to instance one case of conduct in things apparently indifferent, in order to shew the sort of considerations by which we ought to be guided in them. Yet even in this case, how various are the arguments which have been necessarily omitted! how infinite in number and diversity the peculiar circumstances which beset each real case of action, which give to it its own particular colour and complexion, which involve sin, wilful often and grievous sin, if they be not rightly observed and attended to,—true moral improvement, real progress

in Christian holiness, if their real practical requirements be carefully studied, and simply obeyed! Our minds are fearfully and wonderfully made; sensitive, beyond description sensitive, of certain things, and those things the very circumstances of the world in which they are placed. Not a law which God has given, not a single trait of natural temper or disposition, not a single temptation which assails us from without or from within, not the slightest example of another's conduct, not one of the innumerable particulars of our condition and situation on earth, but has the power of operating, with vast influence for good or ill, upon our character and prospects.

All things indeed are lawful. We will not strive to diminish or contract our Christian liberty. St. Paul asserts four times in this Epistle, that all things are lawful. But as often as he asserts it, he adds a clause of great restraint: *All things are lawful, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. All things are lawful, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful, but all things edify not.* God give us grace to lay to heart his precept; to pray for constant light to apply it to ourselves; that though our daily path be in the midst of things lawful, we may be guided in it by the light of Christian expediency and edification, and, *whether we eat, or whether we drink, or whatsoever we do, we may do all to the glory of God!*

THE END.